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Analysis of struggle for black rights on campus

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On March 16 a group of white students at Denison University initiated a protest on behalf of the black student demands. Many of their fellow students and some thirty faculty then joined with them in a massive boycott of classes designed to elicit administration and trustee acceptance of those demands. That boycott is now in its second week and it is imperative that those of us participating in the strike make clear why we are so committed and what we hope to accomplish. Our friends as well as our angry opponents certainly deserve to know why we are willing to disrupt business as usual until this issue is satisfactorily settled. Here are the reasons why we have drawn the line.

1. This university has no right to recruit, admit and sustain a black student community unless it is prepared to meet the demands presented in December 1969. Those demands were the product of some four years of black experience at Denison, a search for equality, dignity and freedom constantly frustrated by the white members of this university. Can we honestly tell them that they do not know what this has meant and that we know better than they how to meet their needs? The demands, it must be remembered, included a tremendous initial concession on the part of the black students. They did not insist on a program that would immediately satisfy their aspirations. Instead (perhaps foolishly) they gave us, in an act of incredible trust, a set of proposals that were the absolute minimum necessary to begin creating a viable atmosphere in 1970-71. They thus undercut their bargaining position at the start. They asked for mere survival and we told them it was too much, too extreme, and too strident in tone. We told them in effect to die some more while we discussed the survival program and decided whether or not it suited our liberal inclinations.

2. In spite of an incredible lack of understanding initially the faculty did in fact, "endorse the black demands with the intention of implementation." While there has been some earnest disagreement about the meaning of "reformation" we interpreted that action then and do so now as a moral commitment to achieving at a minimum the black demands, which it must be repeated are themselves the very minimum actions required as the first small step toward black dignity on this campus. To now argue that reformulation meant the right to change substantively the proposals or omit some altogether strikes us as the worst kind of bad faith. Rather we understood "reformulation" as necessary for those white authorities who felt the paternal need to rewrite black words before giving them the final white stamp of approval. As to action itself, we expected the task force and the administration to commit immediately the necessary funds and manpower so that no part of the program would fail in 1970-71. Instead of a massive reordering of priorities, there was further discussion sabotaging thereby the recruitment and scholarship efforts for freshmen. While the black students did a burn, we fiddled.

3. We do not disparage the conscientious and dedicated effort of the Task Force, but they have an impossible job under present conditions: namely they are trying to implement the demands within the trustee guidelines (that stereotype the former as "extreme") and without black participation. They thus have neither the financial backing nor the black involvement that would help resolve the racial crisis at Denison. The manner in which the demands are put into effect as important as what is achieved. Does it make any sense to attract more black students and faculty to this campus if those here are already thoroughly alienated and if the Task Force has not been able to work with any of them? There thus remains a significant unresolved problem, the issue of black self-determination and cooperation that the Task Force has not and cannot resolve. Acceptance of the demands will break that deadlock.

sibility that the black students' demands have been largely ignored and that the

4. The white student revival of the demands has enlarged all of our responsibilities toward the black students. The issue had died for them; they had given up hope. We rekindled that hope. If we now abandon the fight, we have thoughtlessly or deliberately caused the black community further pain and suffering. And those of us who make that commitment cannot add to the black mistrust on this campus.

5. A boycott on our part is an exercise of power, of course; it is the only effective power we have. Boycotts of all kinds have taken place on this campus beginning at the fraternities, running through the classroom, and most importantly ending at the black community. If some white students are now denied certain academic rights does this in any way compare with the rights that this campus has withheld from black students since they first appeared? And are the whites now more concerned with their own prerogatives, impregnable as they are, than with the mere beginning on the part of blacks to attain equality of status? We hope no, and we believe that the boycott as our personal witness will help convince the rest of the community and the governing powers of this university that the acceptance of the demands is a reasonable and long-overdue recognition of black dignity.

6. Ideally a college demands honest, authentic attitudes towards issues, not evasion. The boycott is such a stance. A college should allow for an intensity of feeling and experience where true commitment exists. The boycott is such a response. We believe that on this question it is important for ourselves as white faculty to be part of the solution, not part of the ~~problem~~ problem.